

Ngugi wa Thiong'o's A Grain of Wheat: A Historical Meditation

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

by

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Abstract

Ngugi wa Thiong'o's novel, *A Grain of Wheat*, published in English in 1967, revolves around the lives, histories, and meditations of several fictional Gikuyu characters as they encounter the historical realities of Kenya on the eve of independence. I argue that historians and scholars should encounter Ngugi's early novels, particularly *A Grain of Wheat*, as historical meditations rather than literary works or historical sources. Ngugi's novel *A Grain of Wheat*, is circular and tangled as it dwells on trauma to realize new truths at a time when Kenyans were reflecting on and working through their recent violent past. As a historical meditation, this work transcends the standard historical rupture or continuity theses and provides a new, complex, framework for the reader to imagine events and characters that echo Kenyans' lived experiences. As a result, *A Grain of Wheat* invites a global audience into the Gikuyu historical conversation and proposes potential futures of peace for Kenyans.

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Thanks to Dr. Lang, for her advice and patience as I searched for a research topic. Thanks to Dr. Katy Didden for introducing me to Ursula Le Guin’s “Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction” and to Professor Silas Hansen who introduced me to John Paul Lederach’s *The Moral Imagination*: both of these texts became essential to my research and theory. Thanks to Chris Thibodeau, for their constant support and encouragement, for helping me talk through my ideas and then peer reviewing my work, and for their friendship. Thanks to Julia Voigt, my thesis partner-in-crime. The many hours spent at Bracken and her constant encouragement have resulted in this completed thesis. Other supporters along the way who deserve many thanks include: dear friends Ariana Brodsky, Erica Faunce, Sara Barker, Natali Cavanagh, Alex Ross, Toni Berning, Maggie Weighner, Noah Peterson, Abigail Oldham, and Professors Jason Powell, Tim Berg, and Beth Dalton.

Process Analysis

My thesis took root during my junior year “Africa Since 1500” history course with Dr. Jessica Reuther—a year before I even began considering my research topic. Over the course of her class, I learned how to reevaluate source materials, and look at nontraditional sources. African history, I learned, is a tense field of scholarship as historians argue both over what sources are legitimate and who can rightfully analyze these sources. I learned to look critically at who is doing the story telling, as we discussed the benefits and challenges of Western scholarship in non-Western countries, especially in the wake of oppressive systems like colonialism. One of the sources we evaluated in class, was Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s novel, *A Grain of Wheat*, which I devoured in a weekend. I fell in love with the story, the characters, and the details throughout the book. The story felt real and true. I felt a connection with these characters who, at first glance, live such completely different lives than what I’m familiar with. This is the power of literature and creative writing. I was especially intrigued that this book could be used in a history class. When it came time to find a thesis topic, I remembered this book as one I loved. If I was about to devote a semester of study to a certain topic, I wanted it to be something I loved enough to read again and again. *A Grain of Wheat* fit this description, and I set out to find a way to analyze this text with a historical lens for my final research thesis.

I set out at first wanting to focus my thesis on how historians can use texts like *A Grain of Wheat* as a historical source. I wanted to prove that these texts could be historically accurate and analyzed as primary sources for specific historical events, but this stance changed as I went through my research and articulated new ideas. I eventually came to the conclusion that sources like *A Grain of Wheat* are different from historical sources altogether, and should instead be considered as historical meditations. Historians can then consult these meditations as a source for

how people process historical events. I also realized that historical meditations can be catalysts of change as they are often written to process historical events in hopes for peace. This processing can lead their readers into these new peace conversations through complex narratives. This process, then, is what historians can evaluate in their own research.

Overall, the process for writing this essay was drawn out through months of reading through research and following different rabbit holes while taking detailed notes before finally sitting down to write. Much of this time was spent sitting in my ideas and shifting through papers. I would circle around ideas, before then talking to my thesis advisor to help realign myself to an overarching idea and goal. These meetings helped me figure out what direction I wanted to head once I had all my research together. When I selected my final sources, I took detailed notes and then arranged these notes into an outline based on my assertion of the historical meditation idea. Included in this process was a deep rereading of the novel *A Grain of Wheat* as I searched the novel for portions that would support my assertions of historical meditation. Then, I filled in my outline with the thesis material, and, after many drafts and revisions, with the help of my advisor I finalized my writing into the thesis presented here.

As I was writing the thesis, I began with a general framework from Derek Peterson's book *Creative Writing: Translation, Bookkeeping, and the Work of Imagination in Colonial Kenya* and Lloyd Kramer's commentary on the role of historical imagination in literature and history. These sources, given to me by Dr. Reuther, set me in my initial direction as I saw a common theme of imagination and writing for communal change. I wasn't sure how I was going to utilize this yet, but the idea of both history and literature utilizing a creative imagination was captivating to me.

Then, I scoured several databases for literary and historical commentary on *A Grain of Wheat* to get an idea of how scholars have already reacted to Ngugi's work. I found sources such as

James Ogude's book *Ngugi's Novels and African History: Narrating the Nation* that analyzed the historical nature of Ngugi's fiction and the ways literature helps or hinders historians in understanding Gikuyu history. Additionally, I found more literary critiques such as Taylor Eggan's "Revolutionary Temporality and Modernist Politics of Form: Reading Ngugi wa Thiong'o Reading Joseph Conrad" and Byron Caminero-Santangelo's "Neocolonialism and the Betrayal Plot in 'A Grain of Wheat': Ngugi wa Thiong'o's Re-Vision of 'Under Western Eyes'" that provided literary context for the novel. I found there was a divide between those who viewed Ngugi as a creative writer and those who viewed him as a historian. There was a tension as neither literature scholars nor historians could fully claim his writing or explain its significance without also acknowledging each other. Ngugi did not fit comfortably in either box of literature or history. This led me to my theory of historical meditation, which I hope creates a new category that isn't bound wholly by either history or literature, thereby allowing for new conversations on the significance of literature and history in peacemaking.

The most challenging aspect of the thesis process was the first month or so of research when I didn't yet have a clear thesis and still relied on initial hunches. I spent a few weeks collecting ideas, and it all floated around my head and felt overwhelming because I couldn't yet see how they would come together. I couldn't see the end goal and I was terrified at first by the idea of an evolving thesis because I was afraid it would never finalize into something meaningful. I wasn't sure how I could add anything to the larger conversation beyond analysis of existing sources.

In the end, after meeting with my advisor and talking through several ideas, some of which were dead ends, I articulated a new final idea. I took the literature I spent so long wading through and synthesized my thoughts into something that tackled the original gap I saw between

literature and history. I realized that I didn't have to stake my analysis in either camp of literature or history, but instead I could argue for a new category. This realization changed everything because it gave me the motivation to create something meaningful and new that I could be proud of and share with others.

After a semester of reading, writing, and revising, I believe that my thesis is meaningful and relevant to the larger historiographical conversation about nontraditional sources. My thesis analyzes a specific source, *A Grain of Wheat*, but I developed a theory that can potentially apply to many similar sources. This might reframe future discussions about the nature of history and the creation of historical knowledge, and this might realign the boundaries for who is allowed to contribute to this creation and what the creation facilitates. This potential excites me, and I'm proud of what I have written.

In a way, this thesis is a culmination of my four years here at Ball State as a combination of my history and Honors College studies, as well as an inclusion of my creative writing discussions in the English department. I'm proud of my thesis because I was able to pull these interests together and synthesize an essay that is an expression of where I am and how I think at this moment in time. My Honors classes taught me to ask the "so what" questions of literary texts throughout history, and they taught me to consider historical texts in conversation with each other as writers search for answers to larger questions and provoke these questions in their readers. One class in particular, Dr. Tim Berg's Honors 189: Inquiry in Global Studies, taught me about meditation and Eastern philosophy, and these ideas trickled down into my thesis and theory. Additionally, my history courses formed a strong base for my consideration of primary and secondary sources. I learned to think critically about how history is constructed and this allowed for a thorough historiographical analysis in this thesis. Finally, my creative writing

courses taught me to see the intentionality in creative works through recognition of structure, characterization and setting. Discussions in my English courses gave me the language that allowed me to write this thesis as I was able to articulate the stylistic choices of Ngugi's novel and detail the style present in *Historical Meditations*. These are just a few of the many examples of the educational influences that coalesced into this final product, one that I'm proud to submit as my final thesis.

After writing this thesis, I've learned several lessons about dedication to a long-term project and being confident in my own ideas, and I know these lessons will carry forward wherever I go, whether that be graduate school or future employment. Through many tough days of research and writing, I learned to keep going and push past the point when things feel directionless. I found that when I trusted myself enough to put things together, and when I asked for advice from others who have completed similar projects, then eventually I could develop a new answer that I wouldn't have thought of before. I learned that a project like this goes through stages, and these evolutions are normal. My initial ideas aren't always going to be where the project ends up going, and this is okay and perhaps even ideal as my work can evolve through research.

I also learned to have confidence in myself and include my own thoughts and theory alongside that of thinkers before me. Yes, I need sources to back up my thoughts, but, as my advisor told me, my writing isn't just a literature review. I learned that I need to synthesize the material but, more importantly, I need to detail my own ideas about the topic. This requires a certain vulnerability as the thesis becomes dependent on my thoughts instead of leaning on secondary sources. I learned that my ideas are what give the project its significance and they are what make it interesting to other readers. When I allow my ideas to guide my writing, then I open up a new conversation as I open my ideas up to public debate and criticism.

Finally, by the end of this project, I know that this is something that I can do and something that I can do well. If I can do this—sift through sources, take countless notes, wallow in confusion before coming up with an idea, and then write and organize a 35 page paper—where I am now, a senior finishing my undergraduate years, then I can do it in graduate school too. Or, I can use these ideas and writing skills elsewhere, wherever I end up. Long-term projects aren't necessarily something to be afraid of, as I was originally intimidated by the idea of writing a thesis. In the end, I'm thankful for this opportunity to test my research skills and write my way into a new idea, and maybe one day I'll return to this work and take it somewhere new. For now, what follows is my best shot at developing a new theory for analyzing and discussing historical literature through the specific case study of Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *A Grain of Wheat*.

“Learned men will, no doubt, dig into the troubled times which we in Kenya underwent, and maybe sum up the lesson of history in a phrase. Why, let us ask them, did the incident in Rira Camp capture the imagination of the world?”

- *A Grain of Wheat*, Ngugi wa Thiongo

“People try to rub out things, but they cannot... What has passed between us is too much to be passed over in a sentence. We need to talk, to open our hearts to one another, examine them, and then together plan the future we want.”

- Mumbi, in *A Grain of Wheat*, Ngugi wa Thiongo

Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *A Grain of Wheat*: A Historical Meditation

Ngugi wa Thiong'o is renowned on the global academic stage for his work as a Kenyan author, playwright, and scholar. In his literary works, he emphasizes identity politics, historical events, and linguistic imperialism. These concerns make his work controversial as many scholars question the legitimacy of his political writing and theoretical orientation.

One of Ngugi's earliest works, *A Grain of Wheat*, was first published in English in 1967 for a mostly Western academic audience. His works have since expanded to include Gikuyu, an indigenous East African language spoken by seven million people in Kenya, texts and have been discussed globally, both in the West and in Kenya.¹ Historians and literary scholars often dissect *A Grain of Wheat*'s success on two scales: either by historical or literary value. Historians debate the legitimacy of such literary sources, as the historical discipline adheres to rigorous evidentiary standards and disapproves of Ngugi's evident personal political agenda. Perhaps, though, scholars need not subscribe to an either/or argument in this scenario. I argue that historians and

¹ Gary F. Simons, and Charles D. Fennig, eds. "Gikuyu." *Ethnologue*. Last modified 2018. Accessed May 4, 2018. <https://www.ethnologue.com/language/kik>.

scholars should encounter Ngugi's early novels, particularly *A Grain of Wheat*, as historical meditations rather than literary works or historical sources. Ngugi's novel *A Grain of Wheat* is circular and tangled as it dwells on trauma to realize new truths at a time when Kenyans were reflecting on and working through their recent violent past. As a historical meditation, this work transcends the standard historical rupture or continuity theses and provides a new, complex, framework for the reader to imagine events and characters that echo Kenyans' lived experiences. As a result, *A Grain of Wheat* invites a global audience into the Gikuyu historical conversation and proposes potential futures for Kenyans.

Historical Contexts for *A Grain of Wheat*

During the late 1960s and early 1970s, when *A Grain of Wheat* was published, Africanists were reevaluating their methods and theory. In the wake of independence in December 1963, both Kenyan and non-Kenyan historians and scholars had to reconstruct Kenya's past, and they approached this task from two distinct theories. At the time, the given method for analyzing Kenyan history and African history in general, was the rupture thesis, which examined African history before and after colonization as two distinct eras and suggested that Europeans had forever altered African history when they officially colonized Africa in the nineteenth century. An alternative theory, though, was proposed by Michael Crowder and J.F. Ade Ajayi—two historians at the Nigerian University of Ibadan. Rather than supporting the rupture theory of colonial influence, which Crowder and Ajayi argued had “assumed a larger than life proportion” due to colonial propaganda asserting the “moral and social superiority” of Europeans, these scholars introduced a new theory for examining and constructing African

history.² They presented the continuity thesis, which took into account the five hundred years of contact between Europeans and Africans even before colonization.³ Colonialism, no doubt, had drastic effects on certain areas of the continent and resulted in an uneven development throughout, but the larger story of Africa is one centered on Africans. Africa, writes Crowder, “has remained primarily a black man’s world.”⁴ Instead of overemphasizing European colonizers as main characters who upended the entirety of African history and replacing it with imperial history, the continuity method of historiography upholds African history as the focal point. So, colonization, and its legacy, compelled historians and writers to reimagine and redefine a more inclusive method of African studies. It is in this era of intellectual reframing that Ngugi wrote his historical novel *A Grain of Wheat* during his studies at the University of Leeds in Great Britain.⁵ His novel can be seen as one attempt to reconstruct Kenyan history with African perspectives at the center. *A Grain of Wheat*, though written mostly to an intellectual English-speaking audience, emphasizes a focus on native Kenyan, and specifically Gikuyu, histories. So, *A Grain of Wheat* indirectly supports the continuity thesis while also acknowledging the real traumatic effects colonization had on individual Kenyans and Gikuyu society.

Ngugi situates *A Grain of Wheat* at a pivotal moment in Kenyan history. The novel’s action unfolds in the context of the decade after the 1950s “Emergency,” also known as the Mau Mau Independence struggle. Kenya officially declared independence from Britain in 1963, and *A Grain of Wheat* takes place in the four days leading up to this declaration, but the years before this, from 1952 onward, were tumultuous as Gikuyu Freedom Fighters, also known as Mau

² J. F. Ade Ajayi and Michael Crowder. *History of West Africa*. (New York: Columbia University, 1972), 515.

³ Michael Crowder. *Colonial West Africa: Collected Essays*. (London: F. Cass, 1978), 22.

⁴ Crowder, *Colonial West Africa*, 22.

⁵ Carol Sicherman, *Ngugi wa Thiong'o, the Making of a Rebel: A Sourcebook in Kenyan Literature and Resistance*. (London: H. Zell Publishers, 1990), 6.

Mau⁶, fought a guerrilla war against the British colonizers and sympathizers. Ngugi, born in 1938, grew up in this context, and was raised in an area of heavy European occupation. The Freedom Fighters wanted freedom from Britain, whatever the cost, and this included eliminating British sympathizers who were Kenyan. Much of the resulting violence was Gikuyu-on-Gikuyu, as the Freedom Fighters killed Gikuyu who they deemed unsupportive to their cause. This resulted in one of the largest rebellion movements in Africa conducted without outside aid.⁷ Instead, the Freedom Fighters relied on at least six armies of between 15,000 and 35,000 fighters and village sympathizers who supplied resources and information.⁸ This large-scale revolt compelled the British to suppress the Gikuyu, and they did so through expulsion of the Gikuyu from their hometowns and moving them to compounds and reserves where they were “laborers and squatters on their own land.”⁹

Ngugi’s own experience bridges the time before the Gikuyu displacement and the aftermath of the Mau Mau conflict.¹⁰ In 1955, at eighteen years-old, Ngugi returned from school to find his village burned to the ground and rebuilt into a reserve as part of British anti-Mau Mau efforts.¹¹ His older brother was a Freedom Fighter, and another brother, who was deaf and mute, was killed by the British in similar manner to Gitogo’s death in *A Grain of Wheat*.¹² Ngugi wrote his novel embedded in this unspeakable national history and painful personal history.

⁶ “Mau Mau” was the popular name given by the Europeans to the guerrilla fighters, whereas Gikuyu participants often referred to themselves as the “Kenya Land and Freedom Army” (Sicherman, *The Making of a Rebel*, 214).

⁷ Sicherman, *Ngugi wa Thiong'o, the Making of a Rebel*, 216.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Gurnah, Introduction to *A Grain of Wheat* viii; Sicherman, *Ngugi wa Thiong'o, the Making of a Rebel*, 383.

¹⁰ Gurnah, Introduction to *A Grain of Wheat* viii; Sicherman, *Ngugi wa Thiong'o, the Making of a Rebel*, 3.

¹¹ Sicherman, *Ngugi wa Thiong'o, the Making of a Rebel*, 4.

¹² Gurnah, Introduction to *A Grain of Wheat* viii.

Ngugi's novel *A Grain of Wheat*, contributes to the larger conversation of those, such as Ajai and Crowder, attempting to reevaluate and reconstruct Kenyan social and political history.¹³ Ngugi's writing has the potential to be incorporated in historiographical studies as a source that goes beyond standard historical narrative. First, though, one must move past traditional historical evidentiary standards and realize a new lens through which to study history and especially Kenyan and African history—a new category of historical meditation.

A Grain of Wheat is Ngugi's best example of historical meditation, and perhaps his last, as this novel later led him to his more political narratives. Ngugi was well-suited to write such historical meditations, as the conflicts of colonization created binaries that demanded to be acknowledged and then transcended, as "Gikuyu history was surely more than a contest between patriots and sell-outs."¹⁴ *A Grain of Wheat* examines these "difficult moral choices and dilemmas" with complex portrayals of the Freedom Fighters, the Gikuyu townspeople, and even the British settlers.¹⁵ The diverse characters and conflicts in *A Grain of Wheat* enable a "multiplicity of meanings."¹⁶ The novel presents contrasting ideas in tension together to work towards new peace and a new Kenyan identity.¹⁷ All of this challenges traditional historiography, which too often neglects the voices of the very people it seeks to represent, often falling into exclusive, racist or sexist, narratives.¹⁸ Instead, by incorporating a global set of allusions, themes, and stories, with inclusion of Christian prayers and catechisms, white settler characters, and even writing his novel in English, Ngugi creates a space within which to contemplate the dynamic,

¹³ Roger J. Kurtz, *Urban Obsessions, Urban Fears: The Postcolonial Kenyan Novel*. (Oxford, Oxon: James Currey, 1999), 23.

¹⁴ Peterson, *Creative Writing*, 236.

¹⁵ Ogude, *Ngugi's Novels*, 24.

¹⁶ Hamilton, "Construction and Deconstruction," 151.

¹⁷ Taylor A. Eggan, "Revolutionary Temporality and Modernist Politics of Form: Reading Ngugi wa Thiong'o Reading Joseph Conrad." *Journal of Modern Literature* 38, no. 3 (Spring 2015), 41.

¹⁸ Ogude, *Ngugi's Novels*, 153.

traumatic, ever-changing history of the Gikuyu people.¹⁹ The diversity and complexity, then, of Ngugi's *Grain of Wheat*, offers an example of a strong historical meditation that seeks to bring contradictions together to seek and hope for communal and individual change and peace.

Challenging the History vs. Literature Binary

Novelists and historians alike have been writing historical meditations, if not naming their work as such, for years, and, when examined as a genre, one can see connections between historical meditations, both fictional and nonfictional. Historical meditations seek to bridge the past and the future through a present exploration and rumination.²⁰ These texts go beyond simple storytelling meditations because of their historical nature. Maryse Conde's novel *Victoire* treads this line between memoir and imaginative history as the narrator explores her grandmother's past, seeking to recover her life story among the politics of race and history in the French Antilles. Historical meditations like these are grounded in real-world events, characters, and truths as they discover "...what these events mean for who we are as both local and global communities."²¹ Additionally, not all historical meditations fall into the category of "historical fiction," as, for example I would categorize Michel-Rolph Trouillot's *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* as a historical meditation. Trouillot examines the notion of useable history by combining Caribbean and European worldviews. Through the specific case of the Haitian revolution, he explores the making of history and how humans seek to understand their past. His analysis is personal in the way that he guides the reader through his own questions and thought processes with memoir-like sections of his own research. He is writing for discovery as

¹⁹ Peterson, *Creative Writing*, 226.

²⁰ Lederach, *The Moral Imagination*, 147.

²¹ Ibid.

much as for analysis. His writing is also foundational to constructing a new understanding of communal histories and identities. Together, Troillot and Conde are just two examples of what is possibly an expansive genre. For the sake of this essay, I will focus on Ngugi's fictional account in *A Grain of Wheat*, but it should be noted that there are numerous possibilities elsewhere for historical meditations as well. Through the case study of *A Grain of Wheat* I suggest that a new examination of historical literature of this genre will facilitate a more holistic understanding of cultural and social histories, thereby empowering literature as a tool for peace and social change.

Historical meditations encompass a wide-range of disciplines, so, to examine this literature, historians must first interrogate their conventional historical methods in the interest of developing a more inclusive source-base. Traditional historical standards often overlook historical literature such as Ngugi's *A Grain of Wheat* for the sake of objectivity through rigid evidentiary requirements. This neglects the importance of creative works as aids in understanding cultural and social histories. Ngugi's works are criticized by historians for their supposed "carelessness for details" and for "promoting myths as history."²² Ngugi's historical themes are intentional, as he neither apologizes for nor hides his historical allusions. Historians, though sometimes quick to criticize novelists such as Ngugi, also perform similar intentional storytelling functions. All attempts to capture the past, nonfictional and fictional, rely on imagination. As Lloyd Kramer remarks in *Literature and the Historical Imagination*, "one cannot write history without both philosophy and fictional narratives."²³ Quoting Hayden White, a prominent historical theorist, Kramer notes that "the historian performs an essentially *poetic* act" by constructing a "historical field" to explain the past.²⁴ Just as writers structure their novels

²² Sicherman, "Ngugi wa Thiong'o," 359.

²³ Kramer, "Literature, Criticism, and Historical Imagination," 101.

²⁴ Hayden White qtd. in Kramer, "Literature, Criticism, and Historical Imagination," 108.

with characters, plot, and theme, historians also analyze events, historical figures, and timelines through given theories and narratives. Both historians and writers like Ngugi utilize creative methods to construct their stories, and *A Grain of Wheat*, though it takes creative liberty further than a historical analysis might, is a form of historical account and knowledge.

The historian, as much as she would like to make a claim to the truth, must also account for her own subjective framework. “There is no neutrality in anything,” notes Ngugi in *Globalectics*, “...especially that of knowledge.” Perhaps between literature and history there is no truer text, but instead simply different truths accessible to each. There is a freedom in the subjectivity of literature. Writers such as Ngugi, not bound by historiographical regulations, can capture the tone of an era through description and scene imagined in their novels. Authors can engage a wider audience on a personal, intimate, level by exploring character motivations and individual experience, both fictional and nonfictional. Additionally, literature allows other voices into the conversation that traditional histories might neglect, such as women and ethnic minorities. These voices might not hold as much power in primary sources as many primary source materials used in traditional histories (legal documents, diaries, speeches, etc.) are often dominated by white, male, or Western perspectives. Literature, then, brings alternative perspectives forward in new, inclusive forms. For, “in the end,” says Ngugi, “literature is a collective contribution to the human.”²⁵ History and literature also rely on each other and overlap as “irreducible form[s] of human comprehension.”²⁶ Both historians and creative writers use similar methods to write towards truth and uncover our humanness, so perhaps there is a way to transcend the binary of literature and history in search for a more inclusive truth.

²⁵ Ngugi wa Thiong’o, *Globalectics: Theory and the Politics of Knowing*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 8.

²⁶ James Ogude, *Ngugi’s Novels and African History: Narrating the Nation*. (London: Pluto, 1999), 5.

This search for a more inclusive truth is especially pressing for Africanists. The histories of the African continent have often been subject to Western interpretation, which too often resulted in racist accounts that failed to encapsulate African histories because of their insistence on understanding the non-Western world through a Western worldview. Inclusive constructions of African histories, rather, must rely on interdisciplinary measures to corroborate findings and rediscover lost timelines. Nontraditional sources are essential to understanding certain aspects of African history. Given the differing worldviews and philosophies between European and African historians, and their individual understandings of what consists of “history,” standard assessments of evidence are often impractical or self-defeating. Not only that, but historians, particularly Western historians, must tread carefully when considering colonization and its effects on the cultural identity and memory from which indigenous Africans draw their histories.

Historians must ask themselves: whose story is this to tell? “For Ngugi,” writes Derek Peterson, in his book *Creative Writing: Translation, Bookkeeping, and the work of Imagination in Colonial Kenya* “it is the African writer’s obligation to rediscover the ‘real languages of struggle in the actions and speeches of his people.’”²⁷ There is a certain historical authenticity and credibility that only comes through experience, and the identity of the historian constructing the history matters, especially for African history. White and non-white Western writers face complex identity politics if they wish to study African history. This is something that might not hinder an African writer. They are granted a credibility through their identity, and have access to a certain cultural understanding that will inform their histories. Writing, and especially the writing of history, is a powerful act that carries a responsibility of crafting identity. African

²⁷ Derek R. Peterson, *Creative Writing: Translation, Bookkeeping, and the Work of Imagination in Colonial Kenya*. (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2004), 221.

writers, then, take on an authentic personal responsibility with history-making, as they develop historical identities for Africans through a useable past. Ngugi, in this way, acts both as a historian and a novelist by carefully constructing an artful narrative out of lived historical experience. Ngugi's creative works, based on historical realities, are avenues in which "to participate in the 'ever continuing struggle to seize back [oppressed minorities'] creative initiative in history."²⁸ The acknowledgement of his fictional writing's historical relevance is an "act of historical recovery."²⁹ One cannot comfortably fit his literature into either category of history or fiction.

Not only are Ngugi's texts historically relevant, but they call for a collaborative effort to "call new imagined communities into being," as he summons his readers to reconstruct the "territory of the Kenyan nation."³⁰ Readers of *A Grain of Wheat* are reminded of their communal responsibility in the recovery of history. It is understood that Ngugi is not writing behind a distanced, historical, perspective under the title of "expert" or "researcher." Rather, his novels recognize the part readers play in imagining history into being as he guides their imaginations of the characters, setting, and events in his novel. This then leads both readers and author into a new imagining of the future. Historians should consider narratives such as Ngugi's texts as "within the contested terrain of Kenya's historiography."³¹ Adoption of such traditionally literary texts as historiography creates new potential for cultural and social historians and opens more possibilities for inclusive discovery.

²⁸ Peterson, *Creative Writing*, 221

²⁹ James A. Ogude, "Ngugi's Concept of History and the Post-Colonial Discourses in Kenya." *Canadian Journal of African Studies / Revue Canadienne des Etudes Africaines* 31, no. 1 (1997), 88.

³⁰ Peterson, *Creative Writing*, 229, 234.

³¹ Ogude, "Ngugi's Concept of History," 88.

When historians prioritize inclusive sources and research, then they also open their discoveries to more complex nuances and understandings. Ursula Le Guin, an acclaimed poet and science fiction novelist, pioneers this dedication to complexity when she writes what she calls her “Carrier Bag Theory” of fiction. Le Guin is tired of the traditional narrative of the hero’s triumph over conflict.³² Far more interesting, and human, she argues is a story full of “beginnings without ends, of initiations, of losses, of transformations and translations...”³³ This echoes Kramer’s notes on the inclusive imagination present in novels that “portray internal contestations more profoundly than other texts because the literary form sets language free and therefore challenges the categories that reign elsewhere...”³⁴ Literature has a way of grasping at new truths, as it represents the ambiguities of lived experience and systems of meaning-making.³⁵ This ambiguity allows for complex exploration in a way that simple conflict-resolution narratives do not.³⁶ The novel is unheroic, writes Le Guin, “since its purpose is neither resolution nor stasis but continuing process...”³⁷ This view of literature can be extended to history in the way that it defies the rupture and continuity theses by calling for an investigation into the diverse elements that build a history. History has far too often been told along the “hero model,” as events and historical figures triumph over previous eras to stake their own claim on the world. We’ve heard these stories again and again: Europeans triumph over African civilization to colonize the continent, thereby overtaking African history; Africans triumph over Europeans and retake their societies and identities. Yet there’s more to any given history than just the destruction or overcoming between opposed forces. History should not be distilled to the binary

³² Ursula Le Guin. “The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction.” *In The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, by Harold Fromm and Cheryll Glotfelty (Athens, GA: Univ. of Georgia Press, 2009), 152.

³³ *Ibid.*, 153.

³⁴ Kramer, “Literature, Criticism, and Historical Imagination,” 113.

³⁵ Kramer, “Literature, Criticism, and Historical Imagination,” 117.

³⁶ Le Guin. “The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction,” 153

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 152, 153.

of heroes against villains, but instead take the wider, complex view of ever-evolving societies and interconnected realities. History is a continuous process, and historiography might take note from Le Guin by acknowledging history-making as a process of discovery, perhaps by also inviting the readers of history into this discovery. Ngugi's own *Grain of Wheat*, as we shall see, carries out these ideas through his historical representations, meditations, and questions that end in a call for reconciliation.

What might it look like to include literature such as Ngugi's into an interpretation of history? How might this redefine the way historians understand our collective stories and worldviews? Such inclusion might require a more complex understanding of our stories, and so call us to more rigorous inclusion along with traditional evidentiary standards. This dedication to complexity might lead to new paths of peacemaking and world building through historical identity.

Through its complex storyline and ambiguous categories of life and experience, Ngugi's *A Grain of Wheat* also inspires a moral imagination for the reader, and the end-goal of this moral imagination is peaceful historical reconstruction. Redefining the boundaries of "history" might place this work and, others like it, in a larger history of peacemaking through inclusion of more complex historical identities. The moral imagination is a concept developed by professional peacemaker John Paul Lederach, as laid out in his book *The Moral Imagination*. Lederach describes the moral imagination as a tool to transcend violence through creative works.³⁸ "The moral imagination," he writes, "requires...a paradoxical curiosity that embraces complexity without reliance on a dualistic polarity."³⁹ The core of this moral imagination is humans'

³⁸ John Paul Lederach, *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 5.

³⁹ Lederach, *The Moral Imagination*, 5.

relationships to one another and a commitment to building and rebuilding these relationships on a complex truth.⁴⁰ A moral imagination would allow for alternative histories such as Ngugi's novel *A Grain of Wheat*. This approach might allow historians to, as William Slaymaker notes, "create a wide discursive space for paradox and contradiction..." that would enable a historical consideration of texts like those written by Ngugi.⁴¹ Altering the framework for evaluating Ngugi's novel *A Grain of Wheat* will, I argue, open the historical discipline to new areas of inquiry. For historians, our primary concern, and indeed the significance of all our work, takes place in and with the people it pertains to.⁴² As storytellers, it is also our responsibility to consider diverse methods of history-telling to bring about collaborative peace. Ngugi's *A Grain of Wheat* is one such novel that offers a vision for this moral imagination approach to history, and it does so in a way that sets it apart from both literary and historical disciplines altogether.

A New Category: Historical Meditation

In the hopes of transcending the contradictions between history and literature, I propose a new category for understanding literature like Ngugi's *A Grain of Wheat*. I believe that sources such as *A Grain of Wheat* should not be categorized as only literature or history but instead examined as historical meditations. These historical meditations use diverse literary techniques to contemplate historical truths with the specific goals of making peace with one's past, creating a new useable past, and moving forward into a more complex understanding of the present and the future.

⁴⁰Lederach, *The Moral Imagination*, 61.

⁴¹ William Slaymaker, "The Disaffections of Postcolonial Affiliations: Critical Communities and the Linguistic Liberation of Ngugi wa Thiong'o." *symploke* 7, no. 1 (1999), 195.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 194.

My theory of the historical meditation genre draws inspiration from what it means, colloquially and in practice, to meditate. Meditation is a method of self-understanding and is commonly understood as a practice of peace. This peace is found not in solving one's inner problems but rather by acknowledging these problems and moving forward past confining binaries of experience. Shunryu Suzuki, a Japanese priest and founder of the first Buddhist monastery outside of Asia (the Tassajara Zen Mountain Center), writes that meditation "is not to sit to acquire something; it is to express our true nature."⁴³ This true nature is discovered by "obtaining emptiness of mind" after "trying to be free from the suffering of duality."⁴⁴ Meditation is achieved when one dwells within the "various images you find in your mind," through letting them come and go instead of controlling them into a strict narrative.⁴⁵ As noted later in this thesis, Ngugi's *A Grain of Wheat* embodies this meditative structure with an intertwining of character experiences and historical themes.

The realities of meditation combine with the theories of the moral imagination to inspire readers to realize their own responsibilities for peaceful reconciliation and construction of a useable past. The moral imagination "has a quality of transcendence. It breaks out of what appears to be narrow... [away from] determined dead-ends."⁴⁶ Through creative works and contemplation, one develops a perceptive understanding of ambiguity and possibility.⁴⁷ Those who live and think with such an outlook welcome complexity in a way that allows them to see new stories and new opportunities.⁴⁸ If meditative and contemplative practices can extend into creative works, and, if creative works can come to be accepted as historically significant, then

⁴³ Shunryu Suzuki. *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*. Edited by Trudy Dixon. (Boston, MA: Shambhala, 2011), 37.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁴⁶ Lederach, *The Moral Imagination*, 27.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁴⁸ Lederach, *The Moral Imagination*, 37.

perhaps the way forward is to analyze a new genre of historical meditations. Doing so will redefine the way historians consider history-making and this has the potential to “transform rather than merely confirm our understanding of the world.”⁴⁹ New categorizations like the historical meditation open our horizons of understanding for new historical discovery and analysis.

Novels such as Ngugi’s *Grain of Wheat* are especially well-equipped to develop a communal conscience through historical meditation, even as their narratives are fictional, for their storylines, worlds, and musings are real and historical. The fictional lens allows the authors a necessary distance to meditate and contemplate the historical events. This then translates into real-world thought and action for both the readers and the writers as consideration of contradictions, complexities, and identities leads to possibility.

What I mean by historical meditation, though, is not simply historical fiction. Historical fiction encompasses all fiction with historical components or allusions, such as research, characters, or setting. Yet historical fiction also falls into the same trap as many histories in that it often relies on the traditional conflict-resolution model with a hero, or set of heroes, overcoming historical challenges. Historical meditations embody Le Guin’s “Carrier Bag Theory” approach, as mentioned earlier. They take into account multiple perspectives within a work that draws from a variety of traditions. There are no clear winners or losers in the novel, but instead the author invites us to consider the characters and the complexities of their situations. Perhaps, we should ask, as Ngugi does in *Globalectics*, “Can we think of fiction, the novel, as writing theory?”⁵⁰ Ngugi argues that to do so, “we have to go back to the original

⁴⁹ Kramer, “Literature, Criticism, and Historical Imagination,” 119.

⁵⁰ Thiong’o, *Globalectics*, 15.

meaning of theory in Greek, *theoria*, meaning a view and a contemplation.”⁵¹ This contemplation is an examination of and reflection on society.⁵² The reflections in historical meditations are not only meant for the author, who is at work on the page struggling themselves to understand their own “encounter[s] with chaos,”⁵³ but these reflections also enter the readers’ worldviews in hopes of developing a communal consciousness or awareness. This hope is sometimes political, as *A Grain of Wheat* seeks to instill a hope in the development of a unified Kenyan identity after colonization.⁵⁴ This hope is made possible through its historical meditation, as the novel is a “picture of reality” which allows contradictions to “speak against themselves” in search of a communal truth, one which more objective accounts would be unable to provide.⁵⁵ These more objective accounts, though valuable for their objective truth, often fall short in creating space for the reader to empathetically consider the situations presented. Historical meditations, though, use literary techniques to build a world within which contemplation can occur, thus uncovering new truths. These truths, though not grounded in traditional historical sourcing, are nonetheless historical catalysts for communal and personal change.

Historical meditations, as much as they develop and impart a communal consciousness, are inherently personal contemplations, as authors write from their individual worldviews. The search for understanding through contemplation comes from an inner desire to find peace amidst chaotic events seemingly out of our own control. For historical meditations, this requires a combination of personal history and public history, as writers comment on the public society

⁵¹ Thiong’o, *Globalectics*, 15

⁵² Thiong’o, *Globalectics*, 16.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁵⁴ Byron Caminero-Santangelo, “Neocolonialism and the Betrayal Plot in ‘A Grain of Wheat’: Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s Re-Vision of ‘Under Western Eyes.’” *Research in African Literatures* 29, no. 1 (Spring 1998), 147.

⁵⁵ Slaymaker, “Disaffections of Postcolonial Affiliations,” 195.

within their personal experience.⁵⁶ Instead of hindering the work's truth, an author's subjective voice and experience enhances their work when it is viewed as a historical meditation. This genre, in fact, gives them a language by which to "understand and name" their experiences.⁵⁷ Ngugi writes that objective writing in his brief journalism career could not "capture the complexity of what [he] had experienced in colonial Kenya."⁵⁸ "The blood in the streets; the dead guerrillas hung on trees as a public spectacle; the horror stories of white officers collecting ears..." was too much to be explained in such a direct fashion.⁵⁹ Instead, he utilizes his position as "a spectator of both the public and his own private history..." to contemplate a new story that encompasses seemingly incomprehensible contradictions, events, and characters.⁶⁰ Historical meditations, and especially Ngugi's own *Grain of Wheat*, are told without apologizing for the personal subjectivity of the author, and this personal worldview enables an expansive exploration of otherwise complex realities.

Such incomprehensible realities are often the result of intense violence from an external aggressor and oppressor, and historical meditations unravel these acts of violence by recovering a new history where before there was none. Historical meditations remake and repurpose old, oppressive narratives, for those who remained voiceless for so long. This is critical for African histories such as Kenya's experience of decolonization and the Mau Mau conflicts. Colonial aggressions altered Kenyan historical memory. Many traditionally evidentiary sources for historians, such as written records from colonial administrations, are rife with biases and errors from the time as the British claimed that Mau Mau was a pathological disease.⁶¹ Colonization

⁵⁶ Sicherman, "Ngugi wa Thiong'o," 363.

⁵⁷ Thiong'o, *Globalectics*, 17.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Sicherman, "Ngugi wa Thiong'o," 363.

⁶¹ Sicherman, "Ngugi wa Thiong'o," 355.

left a written memory, but one that was biased and incomplete, and so historical meditations provide a more inclusive historical reconstruction as they “transcends the binary categories of the oppressors and the oppressed...”⁶² Ngugi, in his early novels such as *A Grain of Wheat*, uses the past to “found a sense of self in a recovery of history, a recuperation of tradition.”⁶³ In this way, historical meditation reflects his community’s wrestling to create and recreate itself in history.⁶⁴ This history is not confined to the story of the Gikuyu people, as Ngugi includes characters, allusions, and literary traditions from Europe, but this allows for a more complete history of the colonized Kenyans as, “from its very inception, the colony was the real depository of the cosmopolitan.”⁶⁵ This inclusive method of historical recovery is available through the historical meditation, which develops a new story and, thereby, a new identity within the very complexities that would seek to undermine a useable past. This new identity can then be used as a pathway towards communal peace.

Historical meditations are essential to exploring the tensions inherent in building a useable past from which a society can develop peacefully, strengthened by their communal story that leads them into the future. Historical meditations, by embodying the mind-maps of memory, thought, and contemplation, build a space to recover a useable past that is more inclusionary and open to discourse. “Memory is what makes us who we are,” says Ngugi, “Memory is what makes us give value to the present as we plan tomorrow.”⁶⁶ The novel, then, is his translation of this memory-making, which is first and foremost “a historical impulse...”⁶⁷ In this way, his

⁶² Ogude, *Ngugi's Novels*, 157.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁶⁴ D. Salitum Wamalwa, “The Engaged Artist: The Social Vision of Ngugi wa Thiong’o.” *Africa Today* 33, no. 1 (1986), 12.

⁶⁵ Thiong’o, *Globalectics*, 52.

⁶⁶ “Ngugi wa Thiong’o Interview: Memories of Who We Are.” Video file, 18:18. YouTube. Posted by Louisiana Channel, October 13, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AYP9sJvDcYE> (accessed April 28, 2018).

⁶⁷ Kurtz, *Urban Obsessions*, 23.

novels become part of the “collective memory bank” that connects the Gikuyu to their own history, but also places them within the global histories and conflicts.⁶⁸ *A Grain of Wheat* posits a certain framework for remembering the Mau Mau conflicts, and this remembering is interactive as the readers are invited to consider multiple worldviews and situations at once. It is a collection that anyone can draw from to work with and build a new future worldview and identity. This memory bank is not only a tale of “facts” but a tale of “the ways in which things are *felt* to happen in history.”⁶⁹ The historical aspects of Ngugi’s work keep these memories alive, but the meditative and contemplative aspects also move these memories forward into the future. These memories then inspire a moral imagination in the reader, to imagine alternatives that will “transcend...destructive patterns and cycles.”⁷⁰ Ngugi’s writing reflects on Kenyan history with the purpose of the reader also reflecting on their “own place in the continuum of history,” whether Gikuyu or not.⁷¹ So, by writing a historical meditation, Ngugi is able to construct a useable past, recognizable to both Gikuyu readers and his global audience, from which to build from for future understanding, peace, and action. By evaluating historical meditations like Ngugi’s, historians and other readers will develop new understandings for how literature and history can become forces of peacemaking through encounters with story.

Ngugi’s *A Grain of Wheat*: A Historical Meditation Case Study

Right from the start, Ngugi acknowledges *A Grain of Wheat*’s place within Kenyan history and this recognition sets the stage for critical allusions which later develop the plot and

⁶⁸ Alissa Hamilton, “The Construction and Deconstruction of National Identities through Language in the Narratives of Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s *A Grain of Wheat* and Joseph Conrad’s *Under Western Eyes*,” *African Languages and Cultures* 8, no. 2 (1995), 138.

⁶⁹ Sicherman, “Ngugi wa Thiong’o,” 359.

⁷⁰ Lederach, *The Moral Imagination*, 29.

⁷¹ Sicherman, “Ngugi wa Thiong’o,” 351.

theme of this fictional text. This novel has timely significance for both personal and communal reconciliation in the wake of the real, historical, conflicts of Kenyan independence.⁷² As a brief prologue, Ngugi asserts in his author's note that though his characters are fictitious, specific historical names are "mentioned as part of the history and institutions of our country," and "the situation and the problems are real..."⁷³ In other words, Ngugi's specific references speak to real events, cultural tensions, and larger problems faced by the characters in the novel. The first chapter recalls direct dates in a timeline, noting the ways the 1963 reality of the Gikuyu town of Thabai had not changed much from 1955, which Ngugi notes as the year "the whiteman's sword hung dangerously above people's necks to protect them from their brethren in the forest."⁷⁴ Throughout the novel, Ngugi also continuously alludes to Kenyan historical events and characters, such as Harry Thuku who was a revolutionary leader at the start of the Freedom Fighters.⁷⁵ The narrator remarks that the Gikuyu saw Harry Thuku they "saw a man with God's message," as he "asked them to join the movement [the Freedom Fighters] and find strength in unity."⁷⁶ Ngugi also writes his novel within the situational context of the Mau Mau aftermath, and many character flashbacks echo historical experience. Characters mention the Freedom Fighter's Oath, alluding to the real oath—a verbal vow of allegiance to the Movement—taken by Mau Mau supporters. The flashbacks also center on British tactics to force confessions about the oath.⁷⁷ Additionally, the novel's general tone highlights the tension between the Freedom Fighters and the British, as Kihika's raids and the setting of "Emergency Villages" are representations of actual realities in Kenyan history.⁷⁸ These are just a few examples of Ngugi's

⁷² Wamalwa, "The Engaged Artist," 11.

⁷³ Ngugi wa Thiong'o. *A Grain of Wheat*. (London: Penguin Books, 2002).

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁷⁵ Sicherman, *Ngugi wa Thiong'o, the Making of a Rebel*, 61; Thiong'o. *A Grain of Wheat*, 12.

⁷⁶ Thiong'o. *A Grain of Wheat*, 12.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 93.

⁷⁸ Sicherman, *Ngugi wa Thiong'o, the Making of a Rebel*, 61, 78, 80, 82, 129.

weaving of historical reality into his fictional novel, and this provides him distance and fictional space from which to shed new light on historical realities.

A Grain of Wheat alludes and contributes to timely literary conversations by combining Western Christian tradition and Gikuyu oral tradition in an exploration fluid, international, Kenyan culture. This theme engages the historiographic debate over rupture vs. continuity. Ngugi's historical meditation supports the continuity thesis that emphasizes the continuous influence of external forces and the consistent exchange of tradition and history between Europe and Africa. Such an approach for Ngugi's novel necessitates a meditative worldview that holds opposing forces together to examine the effects of colonialism and the realities of Gikuyu identity in the early 1900s. Ngugi's novel is an "assessment of the influence of imported, European forces on traditional indigenous ways of life."⁷⁹ Each section of the novel is precluded with a Bible verse, some said to be notes from Kihika's own Bible. Kihika, a Freedom Fighter and Thabai legend, was devout in praying and reading his Bible every day.⁸⁰ He spoke in sermons with Biblical references, but also relied on Gikuyu traditions such as the prayer to Mwenanyaga and the repeated anthem of "Gikuyu na Mumbi."⁸¹ Other characters also refer to Gikuyu tradition, such as Warui who tells Mumbi's son about the legend of "the Irimu."⁸² The Thabai community is steeped in both Gikuyu tradition and Western Christian influence, as the narrator notes at the final celebration that "They [the villagers] mixed Christian hymns with songs and dances only performed during initiation rites..." as they rejoiced over their new independence.⁸³ In this portrayal of Gikuyu history and culture as one that grafts elements of

⁷⁹ Kurtz, *Urban Obsessions*, 23.

⁸⁰ Thiong'o. *A Grain of Wheat*, 22.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 21, 78.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 163.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 200.

Western culture to Kenyan tradition, Ngugi suggests a new framework for considering Kenyan history and moving forward into a culture that accepts both influences as essential to modern Gikuyu identity.⁸⁴ The characters in *A Grain of Wheat*, echoing historical figures and Gikuyu realities, embody the continuity of Kenyan history and the ever-shifting influence between Gikuyu culture and outside forces in a way that does not discredit or over-emphasize either tradition.

A Grain of Wheat also incorporates Western and Gikuyu traditions on a structural and formal level of composition as it fuses oral tradition with the written form of the novel. *A Grain of Wheat* is a written story that revolves around a multitude of characters' verbal retellings of their own histories.⁸⁵ So, the novel's storytelling itself becomes an amalgamation of Western and Gikuyu traditions. With literary references throughout to works like Joseph Conrad's *Under Western Eyes*, the combination of Gikuyu and Western tradition is achieved on a structural level.⁸⁶ Additionally, the novel is written in English to an English audience about a Kenyan and Gikuyu consciousness, and this meshes the two cultures as English readers take part in reevaluating Kenyan history.⁸⁷ In this way, *A Grain of Wheat* suggests that local histories are "not subordinated to Western cultural form," but instead can work with Western forms to evolve both oral and written traditions.⁸⁸ Ngugi, then, uses his novel to model a new mode of thinking that transcends traditional written and structural binaries for storytelling and genre, and he invites the reader to move forward with both Western and Gikuyu traditions in mind.

⁸⁴ Ogude, *Ngugi's Novels*, 91.

⁸⁵ Caminero-Santangelo, "Neocolonialism and the Betrayal Plot," 149.

⁸⁶ Hamilton, "Construction and Deconstruction," 145.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ogude, *Ngugi's Novels*, 92.

As *A Grain of Wheat*'s literary structure and context emphasize the continuity of Kenyan history and Gikuyu culture by inviting non-Gikuyu sources into the conversation, the novel's narrative style also incorporates diverse participants and traditions into the construction of Kenyan identity. Multitudes of characters in *A Grain of Wheat* sift through memories and experiences of their recent traumatic past, and the narrator and his readers become dynamic characters as they participate together in a distanced meditation of these stories. Throughout the novel, the narrator speaks directly to the reader with the use of the "our" pronoun.⁸⁹ This creates an assumption that the reader shares the story of the narrator and implicates them in the knowledge that is revealed throughout the novel.⁹⁰ This is not just the story of the Gikuyu people, this is *our* story.⁹¹ Mugo is *our* village hero.⁹² We all remember Tom the Terror, and Mugo and Kihika.⁹³ It is our singing that recreated our history, "giving it life through [our] words and voices."⁹⁴ "We wove new legends" and together we moved forward in hope, or so the narrator of *A Grain of Wheat* would have us remember.⁹⁵ This remembering creates a feeling of shared history between the narrator and the readers, and so both reader and narrator become "active participant[s] in the progress of the narrative."⁹⁶ In this way, Ngugi's novel is a timeless meditation, as readers are drawn into the story under the "our" of Thabai. This narrative choice is intentional, and remarkable, considering the novel was originally written for an English audience. By inviting international readers to consider and contemplate these Gikuyu stories in such an intimate way, as neighbors, Ngugi counteracts the idea of an "us" versus "them" binary.

⁸⁹ Gurnah, Introduction to *A Grain of Wheat*, ix.

⁹⁰ Caminero-Santangelo, "Neocolonialism and the Betrayal Plot," 149.

⁹¹ Hamilton, "Construction and Deconstruction," 140.

⁹² Thiong'o, *A Grain of Wheat*, 175.

⁹³ Ibid., 180.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 214.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 200.

⁹⁶ Hamilton, "Construction and Deconstruction," 140.

His historical meditation is inclusive, not only in its characters within the novel, but also with its extension beyond the novel. The novel ends, but, given the newfound shared history between the narrator and the reader, it is up to the reader to carry on the acts of storytelling and confession to bring communities together. *A Grain of Wheat* calls its readers to imagine themselves within the Thabai community history, and, in so doing, they become participants in enacting the hope foreshadowed at the end of the novel.

The historical and cultural contexts for Ngugi's *A Grain of Wheat* are not just plot-points, backdrops, or useful structures for the novel but a setting for the meditation itself as Ngugi's emphasis on the varied consequences and reactions to Freedom Fighters, from both local Kenyan communities and the British government, reinforces the complexity of their stories and the need for reconciliation. The guerrilla war was a major turning point for both Kenyan history and Ngugi's own personal history, and so it becomes an icon "around which national identity has to be built."⁹⁷ In *A Grain of Wheat*, the narrator remarks that almost everyone was a member of "the movement," although not as many could clearly articulate what the movement was or when it began.⁹⁸ The narrator also alternates between terms for the fighters, depending on who is speaking, usually preferring the term "Forest" or "Freedom" Fighters instead of Mau Mau, which is often used more by the British characters.⁹⁹ Early on in the novel, the British official John Thompson writes in his diary that he believes "Mau Mau is evil" and will result in a "complete destruction of all the values on which our [British] civilization has thriven."¹⁰⁰ The perceived heroism of Freedom Fighters within the Gikuyu community enticed villagers of all backgrounds to stand up against the British, perhaps out of fear or nationalism, or a combination of both. For

⁹⁷ Ogude, *Ngugi's Novels*, 23.

⁹⁸ Thiong'o. *A Grain of Wheat*, 10.

⁹⁹ Thiong'o. *A Grain of Wheat*, 46.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 54.

example, General R. was a gentle tailor who made women and children's clothing before the "War of Independence," but, according to the narrator in *A Grain of Wheat*, after he joined Kihika's fighters he became "feared in the village and even among his followers."¹⁰¹ The Freedom Fighter characters in *A Grain of Wheat* highlight the jumble of personalities and worldviews who came together to fight the British, and this complicates the story of a singular, "evil," Mau Mau identity.

The Freedom Fighter's leader in *A Grain of Wheat*, and the main dynamic character through which Ngugi reveals the complexity of the Mau Mau experience, is Kihika—the "terror of the whiteman."¹⁰² The novel follows Kihika from childhood school days of rebellion and devotion to Biblical principles to his adult rebellions as a Freedom Fighter.¹⁰³ As he grows up, his determination to save his fellow Kenyans from the injustices of colonialism is evident. "It's a question of Unity," he says, "We want back our freedom."¹⁰⁴ He believes violent methods will change Kenya through "true sacrifice," as "everybody who takes the Oath of Unity...is a Christ."¹⁰⁵ Kihika, though brave and headstrong fighter in most of the novel, is also a multidimensional character. He falls in love with Wambuku, a woman in the village, but must leave her to join the Freedom Fighters. Later, we see Kihika afraid in Mugo's hut, hiding from British patrols after a raid. Kihika confesses to Mugo, saying "You think we [Freedom Fighters] don't fear death? We do...But a few shall die that the many shall live."¹⁰⁶ Kihika sees his fight as a spiritual, national, and personal heroism, that, though extreme, will prove justified with what he hopes will become a unified Kenya.

¹⁰¹ Thiong'o. *A Grain of Wheat*, 151.

¹⁰² Ibid., 16.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 84, 85.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 87.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 93.

¹⁰⁶ Thiong'o. *A Grain of Wheat*, 186.

A variety of other characters in *A Grain of Wheat* also emphasize the moral complexity of the Freedom Fighter guerrilla war. Karanja, in contrast to Kihika, took the oath but went back on this promise by becoming a chief security officer in the British forces. Karanja struggles with his position between the two movements, as he argues that by joining the British he is preserving Kenyan identity instead of dying a meaningless death in the forest.¹⁰⁷ Others who stay in the village, mostly women, “pined for their lovers” as they “prayed that their young men would come quickly from the forest or from the camps.”¹⁰⁸ Even as they harbor resentment against the British, there is a sense that the villagers are torn over supporting the guerrilla fighters.¹⁰⁹ Even Mumbi, Kihika’s sister, is saddened to hear of his allegiance to the movement.¹¹⁰ Through this variety of character experience and point of view, Ngugi successfully captures the moral complexity of the Mau Mau conflict and legacy in *A Grain of Wheat*.¹¹¹ There are no clear heroes or villains in this story. This subverts the traditional British view of Mau Mau as an atrocious terrorist group. Old British documentation from its colonial era in Kenya consistently analyzes the Freedom Fighter movement with racist ideology and often chalks up the resistance to a communal pathology.¹¹² If historians were to evaluate only written sources from the era, they might be confined to sources such as these racist documents. It might be too easy to fall on the traditional rupture theory tropes of oppressors against the oppressed or heroes against villains. Instead, as Ngugi’s text proposes, varied experiences must be considered, mulled over, and moved forward in search of peace. This, in turn, persuades the reader of the far-reaching

¹⁰⁷ Thiong’o. *A Grain of Wheat*, 144.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 101.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 19.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 99.

¹¹¹ Ogude, *Ngugi’s Novels*, 37.

¹¹² Sicherman, “Ngugi wa Thiong’o,” 355.

effects of the conflict and the need for dynamic reconciliation that can bridge such varied experiences.

Additionally, complicating matters on a stylistic level, *A Grain of Wheat* deviates from a traditional chronological historical timeline with a meditative achronological shifting between character experiences, thereby mixing histories together within the small space of the novel to cultivate a diverse useable history. In this way, the reader is opened to multiple timelines of experience and this evokes a new understanding of the situation and its characters in *A Grain of Wheat*.¹¹³ By writing memories that extend and mix characters' past and present timelines Ngugi accentuates the characters' interconnection between one another and the Thabai community, and this strengthens his overarching message of collaborative communal efforts towards peace.¹¹⁴

To follow the story in *A Grain of Wheat*, the reader must consider multiple timelines and points-of-view at once, and this requires a meditative reading that is open to sudden change and ambiguity.¹¹⁵ The story alternates between British characters, from Mr. Rogers the Forestry Scientist to John Thompson, the District Officer, and his wife Margery.¹¹⁶ More numerous, though, are the Gikuyu perspectives. All of these perspectives are spliced together, even with the British perspectives. The narrative flashes between Mugo, Mumbi, Kihika, Gikonyo, Karanja, and even smaller characters like General R and Njeri, and John Thompson and Margery. Shifting between character stories and placing different experiences in close proximity to one another emphasizes the connectivity of each individual story. Mugo's story cannot be told without Kihika's history. Gikonyo cannot confess to Mugo without leading into Mumbi's story, and her story leads into Karanja's conflict which then cycles back to Gikonyo as both Gikonyo and

¹¹³ Ogude, *Ngugi's Novels*, 73.

¹¹⁴ Eggan, "Revolutionary Temporality," 41.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Thiong'o. *A Grain of Wheat*, 33.

Karanja sought Mumbi's love. So, the storytelling itself builds a community memory that pulls from multiple individual perspectives.

In *A Grain of Wheat* character memories jump around the page as a reflection of the communal confusion over Kenyan identity at the time. Stories shift in and out of each other, as, for example, Gikonyo begins confessing to Mugo by remembering dances with young friends, then jumping to memories of detention, and working back and forth between detention and youthful memories of his time with Mumbi before the war.¹¹⁷ Within this story, told by Gikonyo, there are also jumps to other points of view, as both Mumbi and Karanja are central storytellers at moments in the chapter.¹¹⁸ There are also moments of stream-of-consciousness narration such as when Mugo reflects after his conversation with Gikonyo in a stuttered form with gaps of ellipsis.¹¹⁹ As the story threads together many timelines and voices, an instability "about what is known and what it means to know" is created for the reader.¹²⁰ The reader experiences the same restless feeling of jumbled histories as the Gikuyu search for a way forward from their past.

Some scholars, such as Taylor Eggan, argue that this compilation of "frayed memories," stories that cut off and return later or unravel into other memories, is a symbol of the deep fractures that divide the community and "undermine the possibility of a useable past that could be used to ground a unified future."¹²¹ Yet, by allowing such alternating stories to share a similar space in his novel, Ngugi remarks more on the power of storytelling as a unifying force rather than a divisive one. These stories aren't spliced together for the purpose of clear resolution. Conflict resolution is not the aim of the narrative style. Instead, as the author asks his readers to

¹¹⁷ Thiong'o. *A Grain of Wheat*, 97, 100, 101, 116.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 71, 72, 74, 75.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 120.

¹²⁰ Gurnah, Introduction to *A Grain of Wheat*, ix.

¹²¹ Eggan, "Revolutionary Temporality," 49.

consider alternating perspectives, he legitimizes each individual story's space within the timelines of Gikuyu history as each story leads into another's experience. Ngugi's novel structure models the way in which multiple viewpoints and histories can combine to pull a community together through its fractures, rather than sit stuck in its divisions. As the novel ends with the confession of Mugo and the hope of Gikonyo, so too does the reader have hope in a new Kenya. There is hope in the meditation on ambiguity and creating a space in which confession and storytelling can lead to positive change and reunification despite and even within the fractures created by the tumultuous past.

The achronological shifting is made possible in *A Grain of Wheat* by Ngugi's engagement with a multitude of complex characters throughout the novel. From British settlers to Kenyan Freedom Fighters to a variety of Gikuyu townspeople, Ngugi crafts a dynamic history and a communal consciousness through individual characters' meditations. *A Grain of Wheat* emphasizes complex individuals' lives to persuade the reader of the need for collective change.¹²² Some of this complexity comes from witnessing characters' deepest fears and desires. John Thompson, the British District Officer, pridefully strives for power but is also most afraid of the idea that he might "not be indispensable after all."¹²³ Margery Thompson, is also power hungry, but, at the same time, desires for others to overpower her as she fantasizes, and in some cases actualizes, affairs with other British settlers and Gikuyu soldiers.¹²⁴ Karanja desires Mumbi above all else and yet, out of a fear of danger and for personal safety, he abandons Gikuyu patriotism which might have won her over. So, he abandons the Forest Fighters and lives in fear of British officers.¹²⁵ Yet, many of the characters are also more than their fears and desires.

¹²² Ogude, *Ngugi's Novels*, 24, 72.

¹²³ Thiong'o. *A Grain of Wheat*, 47, 48, 52, 35.

¹²⁴ Thiong'o. *A Grain of Wheat*, 37, 49, 51.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 92, 151.

Karanja plays guitar in the forest for the young dancers and later cares for Mumbi and her family during food shortages.¹²⁶ The reader watches Gikonyo grow up from a young man who artfully carves wood, runs after love, and is shy but kind and persistent in his affections for Mumbi, to a man who is devoted to his work and struggles with the memories of detention and the changes in his own community.¹²⁷

Characters also develop over time as their threads unravel in storytelling. For example, in detention Gatu is seen as a man always in good spirit telling elaborate stories. Later, though, when in conversation with Gikonyo, it is revealed that Gatu has no family to return to and, therefore, is not subject to the same internal trauma as the other prisoners.¹²⁸ Gikonyo's previous assumptions are overturned and his opinion of Gatu changes, thus creating a tension for the reader who must also decide how to interpret Gatu's character. These are just a few examples of the many dynamic characters in *A Grain of Wheat* who are working through the traumas of their past and changing, and growing, as a result. This novel models the belief that a shared history need not be a homogenous or uniform one, but rather, there is room for all in the retelling of story in search of identity.¹²⁹ The complexity allowed for most every character in the novel enables a deeper reflection for both the characters and the readers as they meditate on the past to rebuild a more communal story through individual experience.

The characters in *A Grain of Wheat* are complex not only through their characterizations, but also through their own meditations, as Ngugi emphasizes the power of characters who often confess their histories to move forward peacefully with a useable past. The novel first hints at the

¹²⁶ Thiong'o. *A Grain of Wheat*, 94, 143.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 56, 57, 71, 72.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 105, 106.

¹²⁹ Dustin Crowley "'A Universal Garden of Many-Coloured Flowers': Place and Scale in the Works of Ngugi wa Thiong'o." *Research in African Literatures* 44, no. 3 (Fall 2013), 17, 25.

theme of powerful confession when the narrator remarks that the Christians in Thabai “became the saved ones” by “publicly confessing their sins.”¹³⁰ The turning point for the novel is Gikonyo’s long confession to Mugo, where he opens his heart and his memory, resulting in a “weight [that] had been lifted,” followed by a fear of Mugo’s judgement.¹³¹ Gikonyo then prompts Mugo to meditate on his own story, as “[Gikonyo’s] words tickled something in him, they disturbed a memory...”¹³² Later, Mugo again “painfully reli[ves] a scene he never saw” when Mumbi tells her story and confesses her fears and desires for her future with Gikonyo.¹³³ Mumbi’s story, according to Mugo, “cracked open his dulled inside and released imprisoned thoughts and feelings...”¹³⁴ Through the characters’ confessions and meditations, *A Grain of Wheat* emphasizes the power of meditating on one another’s stories and the change that one can hope for through such connection.¹³⁵ In the final chapters, the unification celebrations are a culmination of this theme, as they are arranged solely for the purpose of confessing the past and moving into the celebrated future. Even though the main story—Mugo’s—upends the assumptions of the Gikuyu attendees, there is hope for redemption after such confession. This use of characters who tell their own stories and are influenced by one another’s confessions, pulls together a dynamic useable past that suggests the future lies in working together through traumatic stories in search of peace.

Finally, Ngugi’s text does not sit in its meditations and tension for the entire novel, rather, his story resolves with a vision of forward movement and peace as the traditional ideal of a “hero” is overturned and, instead, characters must reckon with their individual experiences and

¹³⁰ Thiong’o. *A Grain of Wheat*, 82.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 119, 120.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 121.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 140.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 167.

¹³⁵ Caminero-Santangelo, “Neocolonialism and the Betrayal Plot,” 146.

ties to the community in a way that pulls them to new storytelling and reconciliation. Ngugi's novels invite his readers into new "programs of action" in a story larger than themselves.¹³⁶ As an author, Ngugi understands that writing implies relationship, and literature and imaginative creation, "embodies...the tensions, conflicts, and contradictions at the heart of a community's being and process of becoming."¹³⁷ *A Grain of Wheat* is self-aware of its community's acts of becoming and argues for a creative storytelling approach to peacemaking and discovering identity. This is evident through the change in the Thabai community throughout the book. At first, the louder voices are those who want to overcome the past by rooting out Kihika's traitor.¹³⁸ This comes out of the old Mau Mau ideology, in which "people prayed a different prayer: yes, let all the traitors be wiped out!"¹³⁹ The story, though, is not as simple as heroes and villains, traitors and saviors. Mumbi emphasizes this when she realizes Mugo's guilt and feels caught in the conflict of Karanja and Mugo's suspected treachery, remarking that "she did not want anybody to die...because of her brother."¹⁴⁰ Mugo, then, resolves her dilemma with his confession, but his confession is not the solution to Thabai's troubles but the impetus for future change through collaboration and confession. "We have got to live," states Mumbi to Warui, who agrees saying "Yes, we have the village to build."¹⁴¹ Mumbi tells Gikonyo that they cannot overlook or overcome their past but must instead "open [their] hearts to one another, examine them, and then together plan the future [they] want."¹⁴² It is these statements that mark Ngugi's hopeful approach in *A Grain of Wheat*. His book ends in seeking the restoration of community

¹³⁶ Peterson, *Creative Writing*, 236.

¹³⁷ Ngugi wa Thiong'o, quoted in Wamalwa, "The Engaged Artist," 12.

¹³⁸ Thiong'o. *A Grain of Wheat*, 27.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 84.

¹⁴⁰ Thiong'o. *A Grain of Wheat*, 204.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 238.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 243.

rather than reliance on “false heroism based on self interest.”¹⁴³ The novel ends, not with the culmination of the hunt for a traitor and a destructive overcoming of the past, but instead with acts of confession and creation. Each character’s story is laid bare in the novel, and the mission that follows is one of creative coming-together. Mugo’s sacrifice transforms the memories of his people into a new message of heroism “embodying new values”—values of peace and creation.¹⁴⁴ The final chapter is titled “Harambee,” the official motto for modern Kenya literally meaning “all-pull-together” in Swahili, as an affirmation of Kenyan identity and hope in the future. The Gikuyu must rebuild their village, Kenyans must rebuild their nation, and Gikonyo will carve a new stool, one of potential with “a woman big – big with child.”¹⁴⁵ So, *A Grain of Wheat* becomes a meditation that leads its characters and readers into a new state of mind in hopes of creative action towards peace.

Implications of the Historical Meditation *A Grain of Wheat* Case Study

Reading Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s *A Grain of Wheat* as a historical meditation brings into perspective the inclusion of its English audience and creates an understanding of literature and history’s role in peacemaking through encountering others through story and imagining new possibilities within and between old realities. This opens the discussion for what constitutes as a useable history and invites more participants into this history to reframe the future. Ngugi himself recognizes that the “imagination is the central formative agency in human society.”¹⁴⁶ This imagination, if it is an imagination that leads toward peaceful, real change, is one that must

¹⁴³ Ogude, *Ngugi's Novels*, 134.

¹⁴⁴ Caminero-Santangelo, “Neocolonialism and the Betrayal Plot,” 147.

¹⁴⁵ Thiong’o, *A Grain of Wheat*, 243.

¹⁴⁶ Ngugi wa Thiong’o, “A Globaletical Imagination.” *World Literature Today* 87, no. 3 (May/June 2013), 41

balance both the individual and the community. Rather than seeing life as a series of dualities or binaries, cultivating a moral imagination through storytelling encourages individuals to “imagine themselves in a web of relationship” even with their enemies.¹⁴⁷ The way forward into peace is one of interconnectedness, even as challenges arise that attempt to divide a community, as the search for a traitor and the clashing storylines in *A Grain of Wheat* almost succeed in dividing the Thabai community.¹⁴⁸ This, though, is not the end of the story, as through confession characters begin to reconcile to one another and look towards a new future from their newfound pasts. This leads the reader to ask questions and consider ambiguities when approaching the past to move into the future. By becoming participants in the history-telling, readers of meditative histories like *A Grain of Wheat* are led into the same reconciliation process that the authors write for their characters.

Historical meditations like *A Grain of Wheat* challenge their readers to reimagine their place in the world, but they also challenge historians and scholars to reimagine their disciplines and the creation of historical knowledge. Historical meditations encourage an expansive understanding of history that reimagines our definition of identity and what makes our communal story. Ngugi's *A Grain of Wheat* is just one example of this, as Ngugi himself argued against “the tendency to see the universal and the local in absolute opposition to each other.”¹⁴⁹ If the historic insights contained in novels featuring historical meditations such as Ngugi's are taken seriously, then historians might uncover a more complex and inclusive cultural history. It is significant that the Kenyan novel tradition began in this way. Perhaps the conflicts of decolonization and the contrasting truths present at that time created an environment best suited

¹⁴⁷ Lederach, *The Moral Imagination*, 34, 62

¹⁴⁸ Thiong'o, *Globaletics*, 8

¹⁴⁹ Crowley, “A Universal Garden,” 14

to developing this literature. Knowledge, and storytelling, carry power and Ngugi and other Kenyan writers after him are redefining that power by “challenging our notions of national identities [and] uses of history...”¹⁵⁰ So, writers such as Ngugi become part of the history-making process, just as historians must also work to “develop a dialogue questioning the past...”¹⁵¹ This should be a living dialogue, and a living imagination, as nontraditional source material like historical meditations focus first on people and their stories and invites nontraditional forms and identities into unexpected conversation. Perhaps categorizing certain texts as historical meditations will encourage a holistic view of history—one that transforms our useable pasts to foster future peace.

In conclusion, Ngugi wa Thiong'o's novel *A Grain of Wheat*, through its personal urgency, complex characters, achronological timeline, historical grounding, and thematic message of peace through confession, is a strong example of historical meditation. In both its structure and content, the novel brings readers into the story and requires them to consider the tensions and ambiguities of Gikuyu history, identity, and culture on the eve of Kenyan independence. Also significant is the novel's intended readership of mostly Western, academic English speakers. Published for this audience, *A Grain of Wheat* invites a global conversation of Gikuyu history, and this implies an interconnectedness of global stories and underscores our mutual responsibilities in peacemaking and storytelling. So, *A Grain of Wheat*, and other historical meditations, should be incorporated in historical research and exploration as sources that transcend typical narrative forms and historical standards and inspire their audiences with new questions and stories in search of peace.

¹⁵⁰ Ogude, *Ngugi's Novels*, 2

¹⁵¹ Kramer, "Literature, Criticism, and Historical Imagination," 103; Ogude, *Ngugi's Novels*, 155

Opportunities for Future Research

This thesis is a limited exploration into the theory of historical meditation, as it revolves around one specific novel, author, and historical context. There is ample space for further research in areas relating to historical study through literature, especially in historical mediation. For example, future research might analyze the entire body of Ngugi wa Thiongo's work to examine the use of historical meditation and analyze the way his earlier texts act as meditations that lead him into his more political texts after *A Grain of Wheat*. Perhaps some of his novels that are more appropriate for historical study than others. Additionally, one might dissect *A Grain of Wheat* even further to provide a more comprehensive analysis of this novel as a historical meditation, this time including the long-term effects of the novel on the historical study and intellectual awareness of Gikuyu politics and life.

More importantly, however, is the need for a wider exploration on the genre of historical meditation. Future work might reveal other novels throughout history that fit in this category by avoiding clear distinctions of history and literature. Widening the scope of study will begin to answer the question of how historical meditations might change the way we understand our stories, our histories, and our literature in search of a more inclusive past. Additionally, this will further my arguments that such categorization will prove useful to the discipline of history and change the way we understand social, cultural, and political histories on a more diverse and individual level.

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